Tia R. Shamoon

Dr. Stephanie Vanderslice

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Quotes from *Today’s Etiquette,* 1942

Idiosyncrasy

*There is, indeed, nothing that costs less and at the same time is of more value to you than good manners.*

Etiquette has evolved over the past century and no longer resembles the stiff and rigid mold of yesteryear. Calling cards went from paper cards to plastic cards to free long distance, each having a completely different function than you may think. How should you address a friend, a family member, a neighbor? What about properly addressing your written letters, business cards, personal notes? Are any of these concerns relevant in today’s society? Etiquette was once taught, now it is assumed—and we all know what happens when we ass-u-me things.

Table etiquette has changed little over the years. Most table manners that we still use today were devised in the Middle Ages: No elbows on the table. Wipe your mouth before taking a drink. Don’t inhale your food…I was always taught to keep all limbs not holding a utensil under the table.

A French woman once told me that in France, one always keeps both hands in view, or else it seems as though you may be hiding something. I can only imagine the things people used to hide under the table thinking back over the turbulent years of French history. Table etiquette evolves regionally—whatever the negative extreme during that time period and in that geographic location is avoided. What someone in New York thinks of proper table manners will be different than what someone on the West Coast or in the South would consider proper.

As with regional cultures, etiquette evolves over time, and if you wish to be a loner for the rest of your life then feel free to go rogue and ignore courtesy. We appreciate courtesy in others, and we should except that others look for courtesy in our character. I don’t wish to be surrounded by people who irritate the mess out of me, and I have every expectation of being reasonably asked to chew with my mouth closed if food begins spraying out all over my companion’s face. I also don’t expect to be invited out for lunch again if this occurs and I refuse to comply with their request.

*In both social and business life we seek the people with whom we can be at ease, the people whose manners do not offend us and in whose company we feel entirely comfortable. It must be understood that etiquette is far more than a formal and superficial observance of social customs.*

Courtesy, defined by Webster: “Courtesy—Noun: The showing of politeness in one’s attitude and behavior toward others.” If I had never been taught proper manners (which I have acquired during my adult life rather than in childhood, my father always telling me that if I came home with a black eye he’d whoop my ass in an effort to build my confidence…) my common sense would tell me that someone with their hands full cannot open a door and maybe I should help them out. As explained in *Today’s Etiquette,* “[Courtesy]is something deep-rooted in the nature of a person.”

I think one thing that I have found offensive (and this happens quite often) is the incivility of having a hydraulic door slammed in my face while coffee drips down one side of my leg—the other leg tangled up in bag straps keeping me immobilized. I am a person folks, a human being, and I’d appreciate a little courtesy when you see me trying to pass through double doors with my opposable thumbs occupied.

Just the other day as I was entering the public library, a young man ran past me nearly knocking me off the sidewalk just to get to the door first. At first, I thought about the nicety this person was about to grace me with by holding the door open for me as I lugged in my duffle bag full of books. Reality check—he opened the door just wide enough for his skinny ass to squeeze through and allow my foot to become wedged in. My foot hurt, but it was only wedged long enough for a WWII veteran to jeopardize his blood pressure to hold the door open for me to get through. I was mortified that he had to hold the door open. Why? Because I thing that the chain of command demands that the asshole kid should hold open the door for me while I hold open the door for the man who risked his life to defend our country from a nationalistic dictator. Had it not been for him and the other veterans who *did* die, we’d all be speaking German now.

*Originally the vising card was intended for one purpose only: to be left behind as evidence of one’s presence at the home of another. It was, as the name implies,* a card for visiting*…A ‘visit’ in those days was a formal and an impressive affair, with a sense of duty rather than of friendliness toward one’s neighbor.*

It is extremely difficult in today’s society to determine etiquette, as most devices used in communication have drastically changed in just the last decade. Etiquette remained only slightly changed for centuries because the modes of communication were slow to evolve. Not even a hundred years ago people left calling cards at homes where they extended their social calls. If you were obligated to pay a visit to someone, you could easily call on them when you knew they wouldn’t be home, leaving a calling card as proof that you were there. Many people dog-eared the top-right-hand corner of their card to show that they hand-delivered it to the butler. Women had the day of the week that they remained at home for the sole purpose of receiving guests engraved onto their calling card. This made it easy for people to pass up those they wished not to see and simply leave their card.

The plastic calling card became popular in the 1990s when long distance was still definitional and had nothing to do with social debt, but rather with long distance relationships. There is an entire generation that has never heard of long-distance calling charges, and upcoming generations that will never know the meaning of roaming charges. When social terms change in meaning over the years, you can’t help but to wonder what *calling card* will mean fifty years from now. For me, if I am expected to return a phone call (I hate talking on the phone), I try to call at an inconvenient time—if I return the call at all. I can feel myself slipping further into an un-excepted form of social protocol, but damn isn’t it more convenient?

Contacting someone apart from telephone and *face à face* used to be letter writing. Letter writing? What’s that? Well, that was a time when people picked up a writing utensil and wrote literary language onto a blank piece of stationary (not loose-leaf paper) that could be published upon first submission. Reading letters from a generation or two before can make you feel illiterate and dull. There was such a cognizant effort on the writer’s part to handpick each word that complimented the receiver’s personality. A teacher used to have to worry about the expectations of students writing in complete sentences. I’m lucky now if someone blesses me with 10 seconds of their precious time to text me in complete word structure. I feel like a loser if I respond someone on Facebook with good grammar, but feel dirty if I don’t.

*Wars have been fought and thrones have been lost through matters of precedence…The first general rule of precedence to remember is “Ladies first.”*

I believe most people who were raised in the South understand this rule, even if they do not follow it (obviously dumbass at the library doesn’t). Another rule most little boys are taught is that “we don’t hit girls.” ALL girls understood this when I was in school, and many of them took this to extreme knowing they would not be reprimanded if their bitchiness backfired. Me, I took no chances with my face. Taunting was a gamble reserved for snobs who had Girl Scout Leader parents or at least active on the PTA. It still seems that most calls for etiquette these days are for beneficial purposes only, usually in an effort to avoid extortion (or promote it). Back in the day, one of the only times women were to follow a man was if the man purchased show tickets, “but when they reach their places he steps aside and permits the woman to enter first.” Another rare moment that a woman may find herself following behind a man was in the dark while descending a flight of stairs—that way if the there is something to trip over, the man can bust his ass first. It would be so unladylike to find yourself on your backside in such a public place. One situation that I find most awkward is when a man consistently insists on paying my way. I wish I could carry around my antique etiquette book and give out a few lessons when this occurs, “No gentlemen will insist upon paying a fare when the woman has indicated her intention of paying it herself.” I like to vote, but sometimes I think the feminist movement may have taken away simple omitted pleasures many woman won’t admit to (shithead library hog).

*Culture lies in what one actually is—not what one appears to be or what one’s ancestors were… Those who are truly cultured do not give themselves airs of superior wisdom, do not try to impress the world with the fact that they are better than their neighbors—for, after all, no one is less cultured than the snob. Those who are truly cultured neither ape the habits and dress of others nor repeat the ideas of others as their own. They think and speak for themselves…Those who are truly cultured show respect for the customs, habits, and ways of people who are strange to them. They do not scoff at the things they do not understand. They are, above all,* tolerant*.*

Culture cannot be bought, pretended, or assumed. It takes a genuine need to want to learn more about people, customs, and lifestyles outside of your own. In acquiring this, you have to understand what it means to be courteous. You cannot be courteous if you do not understand how the receiving end needs to be addressed, and the only way to understand is by culture. I see people every day boast about their selfless deeds, but just the mere act of seeking publicity cancels out any candid effort on their part. I am confident that the elderly man who held the heavy library doors open for me did not go about town blustering of this gallant act.

To be cultured is more than knowing your geography and anthropology terms. It is about wanting to make other people feel comfortable in your presence without any benefit to yourself. People inject good Samaritan acts into their lives each day because there is something about helping out a fellow citizen that gives us a rush of pleasure, whether that was the initial thought or not. When the receiver of your good deed looks back with a smile and thanks you for your kindness, I doubt you feel compelled to scream profanities in return. Acknowledgement of our acts makes us feel good, and in a sense, there are no true selfless acts of kindness. Maybe we don’t make it on Channel 7 News, but a quick nod of the head or tip of the hat is good enough for me. Courtesy is an investment: Where you spend it is where you buy respect.